

NATIONAL WEED

June '78

AMERICA'S LEADING NEWSMAGAZINE

No. 34



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Whipmasters of Borneo

by Ed Dwyer

Malaysia is a far-flung nation stretching from the Malay Peninsula across the South China Sea to embrace two large areas of the island of Borneo called Sarawak and Sabah. Primitive conditions prevail, and the criminal code is often disregarded or forgotten. Malaysian justice is swift and terrible, relying upon the fear of Allah and the deterrent power of the rotan, a traditional Malay whip.

The rotan is so painful that the heinous crime of rape is avenged by a mere six administrations, so severe that some courts are hesitant to pass the sentence required by the Malaysian penal code.

For over two years, judges in Sarawak and neighboring Sabah avoided sentencing criminals to strokes of the rotan, thinking there was no expert whipmaster available. One William S. B. Lee in Sarawak told a convicted extortionist, "It is a pity that there is no trained whipper here, or else I would impose a whipping." Lee



Karen Katz

was unaware that there were indeed two master whippers in Borneo, both trained in the fine art of rotan wielding at an elite police center in Kuala Lumpur. Supreme

sadists, they have been ready and waiting to strike flesh for the state.

The rotan ritual has been strictly specified by the Malaysian penal code. The prisoner must accept

totally the decision of the court; there is no appeal. Punishment comes exactly 24 hours after sentencing. No women are flogged.

The criminal is stripped totally naked and taken to a sound-proofed room so his screams won't disturb any other inmates. He is stretched across a rude frame, and his ass is slightly prominent. Pillows are placed at his waist and lower buttocks, leaving about six inches of tight, bare skin for the rotan.

The whipmaster aims to strike the same spot each time, in order to break the skin and inflict complete agony. But every time the rotan falls on the prisoner, even if on the pillows, it counts as a stroke. Should the prisoner faint, the doctor present will examine him and, if he is weak, ask for the flogging to stop. This is reported to the court, which cannot order the strokes to be administered later, but which can pass up to a year's jail sentence in place of the undelivered strokes.

CANNABIS CABARET DEBUTS

At first glance it appears to be a warehouse. During the day workers grunt and sweat behind parcel-laden dollies. Stacks of boxes tower to the ceiling, packing and shipping forms litter the floor. But on weekend nights the downtown loft joins the discos, juice bars, coffee shops and leather dives as the latest in New York social settings: Sacco and Vanzetti's Smokeasy.

Guests begin to arrive around nine, pay five dollars and enter a large room with sofas, comfortable chairs, tables and a bar. At one end is a stage where bands, performers, comedians, poets and politicians take their turn trying to entertain the onlookers. Patrons bring their own weed or sample the house specials: weed from Mexico, Colombia, Jamaica and Southeast Asia. People wait on themselves or dispatch attendants.

The smokeasy got its start last fall when the proprietors decided New York was ready for an alternative to the bar scene. "At least for people who prefer reefer," explained the maitre d' "We're curious to find out if we're really illegal," he added. "An Alaska Supreme Court decision said smoking pot in the confines of one's



Richard Sheinaus

home is legal. Essentially, we're just a private party. Everybody knows everybody. Money paid at the door goes directly to the band and for food. The pot is donated."

It is a scene reminiscent of the early coffee houses, with artists, writers, models, musicians and

other culture vultures sipping on espresso and wine, gossiping about politics, art, rock and sex above wisps of burning Thai

When and if pot becomes legal, the organizers say they "may come out of the smoke and go public."

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